

The Networking Challenge

by Lisa Hinkley

Being a busy and slightly shy student, I found networking to be challenging, even when given specific recommendations for people with whom to connect. Ironically, my most important networking lesson came from a woman I had avoided contacting when I was a novice networker. Although I had shied away from reaching out to her, I came into contact with her through other means: I was assigned to work with her during an internship. Not only did she teach me much about the career I was considering, but she also introduced me to people who I needed to know in my field—including one who eventually had a role in hiring me for my first professional position.

What I didn't know as a student is that people generally like to help others, especially when you make it easy for them.

Networking is among the most effective career development and job-search techniques. Many job seekers spend their time looking at job postings and want ads, but these seldom provide a complete job description. That's where networking can play a role: Savvy students use networking to get the full story about organizations, positions, and career-growth opportunities.

Not only can you use networking to find jobs, but the information you learn through networking can help you craft your resume appropriately and give you an edge in the interview. (Although you are likely focused on your first professional job, remember that networking is important for subsequent jobs as well.)

If you are like many students, networking to learn about career options and job/internship leads is probably toward the bottom of your list of job-search tasks. Unfortunately, it may only emerge as important when you've exhausted your other options and desperation-or some twist of fate-forces you to try networking.

The fact is, if you are like many students, you probably use networking skills more than you realize. For example, to choose classes, you read through the course catalog, ask friends and acquaintances for recommendations, read "student only" sites with feedback on specific courses and professors, and (hopefully) talk to your academic adviser. Your parents also might offer their thoughts. This is networking. It is a combination of research, conversation, and analysis.

Make networking part of your daily activities

You can easily make networking a part of your normal daily activities. For example, it's likely you're being asked by friends and relatives about your post-graduation plans. This is a networking opportunity. Share details with them about fields or positions of interest to help them think of people they know who are doing similar work. Ask them to help you connect with these people, and then, follow through. (Uncertain about your intended career path? Not sure you can offer a clear answer to questions about what you want to do after graduation? Ask your career adviser to help you refine your interests and formulate a good response.)

Make the most of your networking

- Finding people to contact is just part of networking. Try these quick tips to make the most of your conversations with networking contacts:
- Send an e-mail to introduce yourself when requesting a meeting. Explain (briefly!) what you have in common and describe what you hope to learn through your conversation. Include a date and time that you will follow up by phone to schedule your meeting time if you haven't heard back; then, follow through! (Because so many people don't do what they say they will, this attention to detail is sure to impress.)
- Research the industry, organization, and person you will be meeting prior to your conversation.
- Consider information that you are learning in classes, internships, or student organizations that might be interesting to your target contact.
- Make a list of questions to ask; if you are starting with a sample list of questions obtained from your career center or online, customize the questions to be specific to the industry and the person you will be contacting.
- Treat professionals with respect. Use appropriate grammar and spelling when writing messages. If you've scheduled a meeting, don't cancel. Arrive 15 minutes early.

- Whether your conversation is in person, on the phone, or via e-mail, follow up with a thank-you note to show your appreciation and improve your chances of creating a productive relationship.
- Don't be discouraged if some people whom you contact aren't immediately helpful. Be patient, and continue to develop contacts. Similarly, you might encounter people who you don't feel a positive connection toward; in those cases, be polite, send a thank-you note, and move on. None of us can predict which connections will lead to meaningful outcomes, so use care to nurture your connections. Accept networking as an investment in your future that can produce results in the present.

There are a variety of places through which to find people to talk to about your professional interests. Here are a few to get you started:

1. Social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn;
2. Alumni networks and campus mentoring programs;
3. Career fairs, employer information sessions, and networking events;
4. Professional associations related to your field of interest;
5. Friends/family and their friends; and
6. Community groups.

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